A Concise History of Greece

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Introduction

All countries are burdened by their history, but the past weighs particularly heavily on Greece. It is still, regrettably, a commonplace to talk of 'modern Greece' and of 'modern Greek' as though 'Greece' and 'Greek' must necessarily refer to the ancient world. The burden of antiquity has been both a boon and a bane. The degree to which the language and culture of the ancient Greek world was revered throughout Europe (and, indeed, in the infant United States where ancient Greek was almost adopted as the official language) during the critical decades of the national revival in the early nineteenth century was a vital factor in stimulating in the Greeks themselves, or at least in the nationalist intelligentsia, a consciousness that they were the heirs to a heritage that was universally admired. Such an awareness had scarcely existed during the centuries of Ottoman rule and this 'sense of the past', imported from western Europe, was a major constituent in the development of the Greek national movement, contributing significantly to its precocity in relation to other Balkan independence movements. The heritage of the past was also important in exciting the interest of liberal, and indeed of conservative, opinion in the fate of the insurgent Greeks. In the 1820s, even such an unreconstructed pillar of the traditional order as Viscount Castlereagh, the British foreign secretary, was moved to ask whether 'those, in admiration of whom we have been educated, be doomed . . . to drag out, for all time to come, the miserable existence to which circumstances have reduced them'. Indeed such attitudes have persisted to the present. During the debate in the British

parliament in 1980 over ratification of Greek membership of the European Community, a foreign office minister intoned that Greece's entry would be seen as a 'fitting repayment by the Europe of today of the cultural and political debt that we all owe to a Greek heritage almost three thousand years old'.

That an obsession with past glories should have developed is, in the circumstances, scarcely surprising. *Progonoplexia*, or 'ancestoritis', has been characteristic of so much of the country's cultural life and has given rise to the 'language question', the interminable, and at times violent, controversy over the degree to which the spoken language of the people should be 'purified' to render it more akin to the supposed ideal of ancient Greek. Generations of schoolchildren have been forced to wrestle with the complexities of the *katharevousa*, or 'purifying' form of the language. Only as recently as 1976 was the demotic, or spoken language, formally declared to be the official language of the state and of education. One result of this change, however, is that the new generation of Greeks does not find it easy to read books written in *katharevousa*, which comprise perhaps 90 per cent of the total non-fiction book production of the independent state.

Early Greek nationalists looked for inspiration exclusively to the classical past. When, in the 1830s, the Austrian historian J. P. Fallmerayer cast doubt on one of the founding precepts of modern Greek nationalism, namely that the modern Greeks are the lineal descendants of the ancient, he aroused outrage among the intelligentsia of the fledgeling state. The first American minister to the independent state, Charles Tuckerman, an acute observer of mid-nineteenth-century Greek society, observed that the quickest way to reduce an Athenian professor to apoplexy was to mention the name of Fallmerayer. Such attitudes were accompanied by a corresponding contempt for Greece's medieval, Byzantine past. Adamantios Korais, for instance, the most influential figure of the pre-independence intellectual revival, despised what he dismissed as the priest-ridden obscurantism of Byzantium. Indeed, he once said that to read as much as a single page of a particular Byzantine author was enough to bring on an attack of gout.

It was only towards the middle of the nineteenth century that Konstantinos Paparrigopoulos, a professor of history in the University of Athens, formulated an interpretation of Greek history

which linked the ancient, medieval and modern periods in a single continuum. Subsequently, mainstream Greek historiography has laid great emphasis on such continuity. By the end of the century the rediscovery and rehabilitation of the Byzantine past was complete as intellectuals looked more to the glories of the Byzantine Empire than to classical antiquity in justifying the irredentist project of the 'Great Idea'. This vision, which aspired to the unification of all areas of Greek settlement in the Near East within the bounds of a single state with its capital in Constantinople, dominated the independent state during the first century of its existence.

If the nascent intelligentsia of the independence period looked upon the classical past with a reverence that matched their contempt for Byzantium, it had no time at all for the heritage of 400 years of Ottoman rule. Korais, indeed, declared in his autobiography that in his vocabulary 'Turk' and 'wild beast' were synonymous. Yet the period of the *Tourkokratia*, or Turkish rule, had a profound influence in shaping the evolution of Greek society. Ottoman rule had the effect of isolating the Greek world from the great historical movements such as the Renaissance, the Reformation, the seventeenth-century scientific revolution, the Enlightenment and the French and Industrial Revolutions that so influenced the historical evolution of western Europe. For much of the period the boundaries of the Ottoman Empire in Europe broadly coincided with those between Orthodoxy and Catholicism. The conservatism of the hierarchy of the Orthodox Church reinforced this isolation. As late as the 1790s, for instance, Greek clerics continued to denounce the ideas of Copernicus and to argue that the sun revolved around the earth. This conservatism was reinforced by an anti-westernism that had its roots in a profound bitterness at the way in which Catholic Europe had sought to impose papal supremacy as the price of military help as the Byzantine Empire confronted the threat of the Ottoman Turks.

The capriciousness of Ottoman rule and the weakness of the idea of the rule of law helped to shape the underlying values of Greek society and to determine attitudes to the state and to authority that have persisted into the present. One form of self-defence against such arbitrariness was to secure the protection of highly placed patrons who could mediate with those in positions of power and privilege. This was coupled with a distrustful attitude towards those outside

the circle of the extended family. The need for patrons continued into the new state and, once constitutional government had been established, parliamentary deputies became the natural focus for clientelist relations, which pervaded the whole of society. In return for their support at the hustings voters expected those for whom they had voted to help them and their families to find jobs, preferably in the inflated state sector, the only secure source of employment in an underdeveloped economy, and to intercede with a generally obstructive bureaucracy. *Rouspheti*, the reciprocal dispensation of favours that has traditionally oiled the wheels of society, and *mesa*, the connections that are useful, indeed indispensable, in many aspects of daily life, were both reinforced during the period of Turkish rule.

The Greeks are a people of the diaspora. It was during the period of Ottoman rule that patterns of emigration developed that have continued into modern times. Even before the emergence of a Greek state Greek merchants established during the late eighteenth century a mercantile empire in the eastern Mediterranean, in the Balkans and as far afield as India. In the nineteenth century migration developed apace to Egypt, to southern Russia and at the end of the century to the United States. Initially, these migrants to the New World were almost exclusively male. They were driven by poor economic prospects at home and, for the most part, intended to spend only a few years abroad before returning permanently to their motherland. Most, however, stayed in their country of immigration. The emigrant flow was limited by restrictive US legislation during the inter-war period, when Greece herself welcomed within her borders over a million refugees from Asia Minor, Bulgaria and Russia. Emigration once again got under way on a large scale after the Second World War. Prior to the ending of US quota restrictions in the mid-1960s much of this new wave of emigration was to Australia, where Melbourne, with a Greek community of over 200,000, had by the 1980s emerged as one of the principal centres of Greek population in the world. The postwar period also saw large-scale movement of Greeks to western Europe, and in particular to West Germany, as 'guest-workers'. In the course of time many of these returned, using their hard-won capital for the most part to set up small-scale enterprises in the service sector. For a considerable number, however, the status of *Gastarbeiter* took on a more or less permanent nature.

Xeniteia, or sojourning in foreign parts, on either a permanent or temporary basis has thus been central to the historical experience of the Greeks in modern times. As a consequence the relationship of the communities overseas with the homeland has been of critical importance throughout the independence period. The prospect of the election of Michael Dukakis, a second-generation Greek-American, as president of the United States in 1988 naturally aroused great excitement in Greece and, inevitably perhaps, unrealistic expectations. His emergence as the Democratic presidential candidate focused attention on the rapid acculturation of Greek communities abroad to the norms of the host society and highlighted the contrast between the effectiveness of Greeks outside Greece and the problems they experienced at home in developing the efficient and responsive infrastructure of a modern state. The existence of such large populations of Greek origin outside the boundaries of the state raises in an acute form the question of what constitutes 'Greekness' – presumably not language, for many in the second and third generation know little or no Greek. Religion is clearly a factor, but again there is a high incidence of marriage outside the Orthodox Church among Greeks of the emigration. In 119 of the 163 weddings performed at the Greek church of Portland, Oregon, between 1965 and 1977 one of the partners was not of Greek descent. It seems that 'Greekness' is something that a person is born with and can no more easily be lost than it can be acquired by those not of Greek ancestry.

In the United States, in particular, the existence of a substantial, prosperous, articulate and well-educated community of Americans of Greek descent is seen as a resource of increasing importance by politicians in the homeland, even if the political clout attributed to the 'Greek lobby' is sometimes exaggerated, particularly by its opponents. Despite some successes Greek-Americans have had relatively little effect in generating pressure on Turkey to withdraw from northern Cyprus and in negating the tendency of successive US administrations to 'tilt' in favour of Turkey in the continuing Greek-Turkish imbroglio.

Outsiders are inclined to dismiss Greek fears of perceived Turkish expansionism as exaggerated. But those who argue that the facts of geography condemn the two countries, which in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s more than once came to the brink of war, to friendship,

fail to take account of the historical roots of present-day antagonisms and of the extreme sensitivity to perceived threats to national sovereignty that can arise in countries whose frontiers have only relatively recently been established. Whereas the heartland of 'Old' Greece has enjoyed at least a notional independence since the 1830s, large areas of the present Greek state have only been incorporated within living memory. The Dodecanese islands became sovereign Greek territory as recently as 1947, while many of the other Aegean islands, together with Macedonia, Epirus and Thrace, were absorbed only on the eve of the First World War. Konstantinos Karamanlis, elected president for the second time in 1990, was born in 1907 an Ottoman citizen.

Geographically, Greece is at once a Balkan and a Mediterranean country. Its access to the sea has given rise to greater contacts with the West than its land-locked Balkan neighbours. It was, indeed, in the eighteenth century that the foundations were laid of a mercantile marine that in the second half of the twentieth century had emerged as the largest in the world, even if a sizeable proportion of it sailed under flags of convenience. Greece's Orthodox and Ottoman heritage had, however, for many centuries cut it off from the mainstream of European history. The country's identity as a European country was uncertain. Indeed, from the earliest days of independence Greeks had talked of travelling to Europe as though their country was not in fact European. Such uncertainty gave Greece's accession to the European Community as its tenth member in 1981 a particular significance, for, aside from the perceived economic and political benefits of accession, it seemed to set the seal in an unambiguous way on her 'Europeanness'. The Greek national movement had been remarkable in that it was the first to develop in a non-Christian environment, that of the Ottoman Empire. One hundred and fifty years later, Greece's full membership of the European Community was significant in that she was the first country with a heritage of Orthodox Christianity and Ottoman rule and with a pattern of historical development that marked her out from the existing members to enter the Community. The process of the reintegration of Greece into 'the common European home' forms a major theme of this book.